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EDGAR VINCENT, VISCOUNT D'ABERNON

1857—1941

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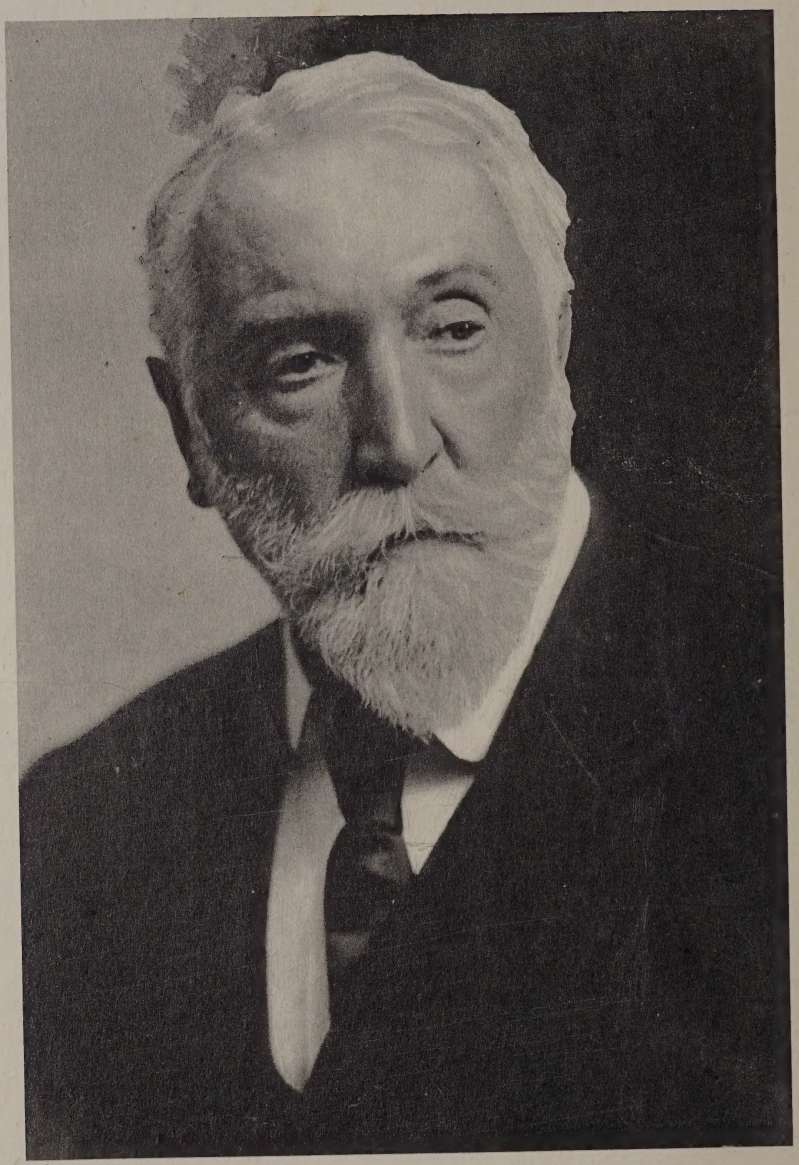

D'Arsonval

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EDGAR VINCENT, VISCOUNT D'ABERNON

1857–1941

EDGAR VINCENT, who became Viscount D'Abernon, was born on 18 August 1857. He was the seventh son, by a second marriage, of the Rev. Sir Frederick Vincent, Bt., Rector of Slinfold, Sussex, and Canon of Chichester. He was educated at Eton, and in 1877 passed, first in the list, the examination for Student Dragoman at Constantinople. He did not take up the appointment, however, joining the Coldstream Guards in the same year. While still holding his commission in that regiment he found opportunity to begin his experience in the Middle East, as private secretary and assistant, respectively, to the Commissioners for Eastern Roumelia and for the evacuation of the territory ceded by Turkey to Greece. At this early stage he gave evidence of his exceptional ability by publishing a grammar of Modern Greek, in 1879. In later life Lord D'Abernon took legitimate pride in the fact that this grammar—surely, in any case, an unusual achievement for a subaltern in the Guards at the age of twenty-two—had been adopted by the University of Athens as a standard text-book. At the same early period he must already have given signs of his distinguished gifts for finance and administration; for, having retired from the Guards in 1882, at the age of twenty-five, he became President of the Council of the Ottoman Public Debt. Two years later he became Financial Adviser to the Egyptian Government, and in 1889, now K.C.M.G., he returned to Constantinople as Governor of the Imperial Ottoman Bank.

There follows a period in which Sir Edgar Vincent seems to have waited many years for further opportunity of public service. He had married in 1890, and he and his brilliant wife, Lady Helen Vincent, were well known and popular figures in late Victorian and Edwardian society. He had been one of the coterie known as 'The Souls', and Lady Oxford, in her reminiscences, recalls him as one of the two handsomest young men of those days. He owned race-horses, and he entered Parliament; but he was no keen party man and had no special gift of oratory, so that politics offered him no career. There seemed little likelihood, indeed, in these middle years, that the great abilities of which he had so early given proof would become known to the world at large, or find adequate use in the service of his country or of the world.

Then, at length, in 1912, he was made chairman of the Royal Commission on Trade with the Dominions; but the war came in 1914 and greatly obscured, outside official circles, the importance of the work which this Commission had done under his guidance. Vincent, however, was raised to the peerage as Lord D'Abernon in 1914, and was made G.C.M.G. in 1917, when the Report of the Commission was published. Meanwhile, having given evidence of his great qualities as a chairman, he had been offered further scope for them in 1915,

when he accepted the chair of the Central Control Board (Liquor Traffic). This provided him with one of the major interests of his later years and, incidentally, with his first point of contact with scientific knowledge and experimental research.

The turmoil created by the novel conditions of the early war years had given new prominence to old problems concerned with the misuse of alcoholic drinks. The subject notoriously bristled with dangers and difficulties for anybody who approached it impartially, because of the emotional atmosphere in which it was discussed; and the constitution of the new Control Board might well have daunted any one asked to accept, as its chairman, the duty of attempting to bring its members to agreement on policy. In addition to representatives of the Home Office, the Admiralty, the Treasury, and Public Health Administration, it eventually included two brewers, a retired manager of hotels, leaders of big industry, labour M.P.'s and a clerical advocate of total abstinence. It appears, in fact, that Lord D'Abernon not only accepted the Chair of this Board, but was himself largely responsible for its composition. Could such a team be induced to pull together, and to produce agreed measures for dealing with the problem presented to them? It is a matter of simple but astonishing record, that it not only attained agreement on every detail of a scheme involving bold experiments and large changes in the habits of a suspicious and reluctant community, but that, throughout Lord D'Abernon's chairmanship, every one of its decisions was practically unanimous and reached without a formal vote. 'I take it, then, that we are all agreed that . . .'—the formula from the chair, when no agreement had seemed possible, had become proverbial. The result was, of course, an extraordinary triumph for the chairman's personality and character, and for his real genius for interposing a practical and reasonable suggestion, when disputants had reduced themselves to exhaustion and to despair of compromise.

Meanwhile, Lord D'Abernon's own reaction to the cross-fire of propaganda, with which he and his Board were being assailed from outside, was a demand for completely impartial and severely scientific information as the only proper basis for policy, and the consequent appointment of a Scientific Advisory Committee, with himself as its keen and active chairman. With him were Sir George Newman, who represented Public Health Administration on the Board, and the late Dr W. C. Sullivan, medical authority on criminology, who was on its staff. The outside members were all Fellows of the Royal Society with special knowledge of different aspects of medical research—Sherrington, Mott, Cushny, McDougall, Greenwood, and myself. This committee was given the task of making a purely objective survey of the existing and trustworthy knowledge concerning the action of alcoholic drinks on man, of presenting the results of this survey in a form intelligible to those without scientific training, and of planning researches to fill such gaps in knowledge as the survey should reveal. Lord D'Abernon himself started work with this committee in a state of cheerfully admitted, quasi-judicial ignorance, not only of the scientific data about the action of alcohol, but of simple scientific terms which their presentation

involved. 'What's this carbon dioxide you talk about?' he asked. 'Is that a kind of alcohol?' By the time, however, that the committee's agreed findings were ready to be embodied for publication in the little book entitled *Alcohol —its action on the human organism*, Lord D'Abernon, who had taken a lively interest in the discussion of the chapters, each drafted by a member of the committee, was in a position to contribute a very able Introduction. As for the researches promoted to fill gaps in knowledge, though he was working late every day and at high pressure, he found time and interest to visit those who were doing the work, and stayed to watch and to discuss experiments in actual progress. In a life which had brought him experience in such abundance and variety, this was his first contact with experimental knowledge in the making, and it clearly gave him a genuine thrill and opened a vista of new interests.

In 1920 this new interest in the alcohol problem and in research was interrupted by the call to go to Berlin as the first British Ambassador to the Republican Government of Germany, after signature of the Peace Treaty. The result of his mission is a matter of history and outside the scope of this notice. His warning to the German Government as to the inevitable result of their financial policy, and Herr Stresemann's complete dependence on him, when the predicted catastrophe came, for the measures which restored stability on a new basis—these things have been often recorded. He retired from the Embassy in 1926, a G.C.B., after the Locarno Agreement had been signed and Germany admitted to the League of Nations. It is more to the present purpose to recall that, after his return to this country, he presented and published an able technical study of the economics of post-war Germany, and that the interest with which this was received led to his election as president of the Royal Statistical Society.

Lord D'Abernon had long been known to have a wide knowledge of art, both ancient and modern, and he was a trustee of both the National and the Tate Gallery. With the addition of his more recent but growing interest in science, he had unusual qualifications for his next important public undertaking, as chairman of the Royal Commission on National Museums and Public Galleries. Unlike most commissions this one also achieved unanimity in its Report, the publication of which was completed in 1930. Meanwhile, in 1929, Lord (now Viscount) D'Abernon led a British economic mission to South America; and then, in the autumn of the same year, he accepted the last public office which gave him opportunity of rendering 'conspicuous service to the cause of science', as chairman of the Medical Research Council, in succession to the late Earl Balfour.

His quick interest in experimental science, in connexion with the work promoted by the Scientific Committee of the Liquor Board, promised much from its development over a wider field of medical researches, in connexion with this new appointment. He was, in fact, the first chairman of the Medical Research Council to spend a large part of a day at the National Institute for Medical Research, so as to feel that he had made first-hand contact with the varied activities of its staff. He was already seventy-two years of age, however, before he undertook this last public duty, and he had not long held the office

before the slow decline into final illness, which progressively immobilized him in his remaining years, had begun to impose a hampering restriction on his activities. But, though the work of the Medical Research Council never had all that he could have given at his brilliant best, his courage and his interest kept him at it till 1934.

Just before he retired from this last public service, Lord D'Abernon was elected to our Fellowship under statute 12. There could be no doubt that the election gave him very great pleasure, and that he gave it very high rank among the many honours and recognitions which had come to him. It is sad to think that his disability, then becoming severe, prevented him from taking any active part in the Society's affairs. He had been a brilliant social figure, a connoisseur of the arts, an enthusiastic cultivator of more than one sport, a distinguished man of affairs and public servant, and a devoted and courageous worker for international understanding. To the Society it meant most of all that he had become a sincere friend of science. If his enjoyment of the Fellowship could have been active, his presence among us might well have recalled the traditions of the Society's earlier days, when great men of his type were more frequent among its Fellows than in more recent years.

H. H. Dale

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